



Grove Hall Public Art Project: Impact on Community and Cityscape

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Citation	Koza, Anne. 2019. Grove Hall Public Art Project: Impact on Community and Cityscape. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.
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Grove Hall Public Art Project: Impact on Community and Cityscape

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A Thesis in the Field of Visual Arts

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

November 2019

Abstract

This thesis examines three murals created through The Grove Hall Public Art Project. This federally funded public arts grant awarded \$70,000 from the Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Choice Neighborhoods Implementation (CNI) Grant to transform the cityscape in Grove Hall, Boston. Addressing American murals in a historic context, as socially engaged art, and examining the history of the community of Grove Hall this thesis evaluates the Grove Hall murals in relation to their value to the Grove Hall community as agents for social change.

Frontispiece



Dedication

I dedicate this to all those who told me “just write.” So much of this process for me was an internal battle of getting myself to sit down and put proverbial pen to paper. If it were not for people believing in me, editing me, and telling me to keep on going, I would not be here. So thank you. And if you are reading this and feel like you have an idea but don’t know if anyone cares, they do, and you should write it down and share it with the world.

Acknowledgments

Cynthia Fowler, you pulled me out of the vagueness of concept to concrete action. John Stilgoe, from the moment I stepped into your class and got to hear about how you see the world I saw your attention to the details of life and knew I would be happy to follow your train of thought wherever it traveled. Thank you for recognizing and calming my internal dialogue of self-doubt. No one can do this alone. Family, friends, yoga, tea, needing to spontaneously pick up my cat and squeeze him before I wrote another paragraph all contributed to completing this thesis. For all of you I am so grateful.

Table of Contents

Frontispiece.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgments.....	1
List of Figures	3
Introduction.....	5
Chapter I. The Grove Hall Public Art Project and Public Art in Boston	1
Chapter II The Grove Hall Murals in an Historic Context	1
Murals of The New Deal	1
<i>The Wall of Respect</i> (1967).....	3
<i>The Great Wall of Los Angeles</i> (1978).....	6
Boston Murals in the 1960s and 1970s	10
Chapter III. Murals as a Medium, as Urban Development, and as Socially Engaged Art..	1
Stages of Creating a Mural	1
Murals as a tool for Urban Development	3
Murals as Socially Engaged Art	4
Chapter IV Grove Hall Murals and their Artists.....	1
Robert 'Problak' Gibbs – <i>Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life</i>	2
Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life.....	2
Victor “Marka27” Quiñonez – <i>Love Thyself</i>	5
Love Thyself.....	5
David “Don Rimx” Sepulveda – <i>Powerful Knowledge</i>	10
Powerful Knowledge.	10

Chapter V. The Grove Hall Murals and their Impact as Socially Engaged Art in Boston..	1
Conclusion	6
References.....	9

List of Figures



Figure 1. *Afro Futurism/*

<i>Breathe Life</i>	2
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Figure 2. *Love Thyself*. 5



Figure 3. *Powerful*

Knowledge. 10

Introduction

Outside lies utterly ordinary space open to any casual explorer willing to find the extraordinary. Outside lies unprogrammed awareness that at times becomes directed serendipity. Outside lies magic. — John Stilgoe

In 2010 I took my first class at Harvard Extension School, Crucial Issues in Landscape with John Stilgoe. From that first class I knew I had found a home in the Visual Arts Department. Stilgoe invited a sense of academic curiosity to what others may view as a recyclable advertisement. It is in our own sense of curiosity and wonder of this world that create a purposeful life. That class helped me find my voice. Even if my ideas to others may be off-kilter they had a place in the discourse of our classroom and were received with interest.

The road to this thesis was a long one down many topic interests that led to dead-ends. But with most things it is not what I originally had planned that ended up working out the best. The Grove Hall Public Arts Project was something I stumbled on when I was scrolling the internet for threads of ideas. I read one short article on it and on a whim mentioned it to my Academic Advisor Cynthia Fowler. I was sure she would dismiss it, but she picked up the potential in the concept and told me to run with it. And in an instant a flicker of an idea became the seed for this thesis.

The Grove Hall Public Arts Project resulted in the creation of three murals that changed the landscape of the area. This thesis attempts to measure the general success of a government funded public arts program in relation to its involvement and impact on the community through planning, implementation, and lasting presence.

It feels serendipitous that Stilgoe is my Thesis Director for a project that concludes where I started, studying Crucial Issues in Landscape, now instead of in the classroom on I have taken my studies outside and onto the sidewalks of Boston.

Chapter I.

The Grove Hall Public Art Project and Public Art in Boston

Grove Hall, a nook in Boston, is a community that has long felt a cultural and socioeconomic divide from the rest of the city. In recent years Grove Hall has seen an influx of government-funded as well as private development projects. The Grove Hall Public Art Project is one such project, federally funded by the Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Choice Neighborhoods Implementation (CNI) Grant. Boston is one of five cities awarded this grant which is intended to help transform high-poverty, distressed neighborhoods into communities with affordable housing, safe streets, and access to quality educational opportunities.¹ Boston received \$20.5 million to help redevelop distressed housing, to improve community facilities, gardens, parks, to encourage job creation, and to provide supportive services for residents of Quincy Heights and the surrounding Quincy Street Corridor.² Approximately \$70,000 of the funding was allocated to supporting public art in the neighborhood. Five artists were selected for the Grove Hall Public Art Project: one artist created an interactive art project; one created banners of local public figures that hang in the Grove Hall Public Library; and the other three artists created murals. What is so compelling about mural art, why is it the predominate means of public art being supported by HUD, and How will it help support community building in Grove Hall?

¹ <https://www.boston.gov/housing/choice-neighborhoods>

² <https://www.boston.gov/housing/choice-neighborhoods>

Grove Hall is a predominantly African-American area of greater Boston linking Dorchester and Roxbury and became part of Boston in 1868. Historically, Grove Hall was the largest Jewish community in New England until the 1950s. Yet there was violence among the residents. In the 1940s there are records of between Irish and Jewish youth. In July of 1943 alone there are eight reported incidences of anti-Semitic violence. After WWII, the Jewish population rapidly moved to suburbs like Brookline and Newton, and Grove Hall experienced a major transition in the 1950s and 1960s where the majority of residents shifted to African-American in part because of the Banks Urban Renewal Group (BBURG). The BBURG, established in 1968, offered home mortgage funds to low-income black families within a designated area, including Roxbury, the South End, parts of Dorchester and Jamaica Plain, and the northern part of Mattapan. In other parts of the city, black families were being refused FHA loans.³ Starting in the 1960s the demographics of the neighborhood shifted towards African-Americans, as this was one of the only neighborhoods they could get a loan. As of the 2010 census, the Grove Hall neighborhood consisted of approximately 8,900 people: 62% of the Grove Hall population is black and 36% Hispanic or Latino. About 38% of those living in Grove Hall have an income below the poverty line or make less than 30% of the area median income.⁴

The challenging conditions that define the Grove Hall community today have their roots in the 1960s. By the mid-1960s, the community of Grove Hall experienced a real disparity of economic opportunity. *Boston Globe* writer Akilah Johnson comments

³ http://www.gettingtotheroots.org/grove_hall_history

⁴ <https://www.boston.gov/housing/choice-neighborhoods>

on the job opportunities available for the black community of Grove Hall in the 1960s in his article “The Forgotten Riot that Sparked Boston’s Racial Unrest”:

Whites who could afford to leave had begun moving out of the city in search of suburban life and better jobs, creating openings for blacks in an economy they had long been largely shut out from, community activists said. Still, the blue-collar jobs that were available to black people in most cities tended in Boston to be the preserve of the city’s white ethnic groups—Jewish, Italian, Irish, Polish, and Yankee—leaving less opportunity for the city’s growing black population (June 2, 2017).

Tensions came to a head on June 2, 1967 when the first major civil rights riot of Boston broke out in Grove Hall and lasted three days. It started as a peaceful sit-in protest of the Mothers for Adequate Welfare in the Welfare Office of Grove Hall. Both black and white women protested the poor treatment they received by welfare office employees. Johnson goes on to say about the general tone of race relations in Boston in 1967:

Old Boston was changing in many ways. With a new City Hall under construction, a spate of downtown construction, and even faint intimations of a miracle in the offing at Fenway Park, things seemed to be looking up on many fronts. But on race, the city was stuck, and not in a good place at all. Some neighborhoods were off limits to black homeowners. Jobs were scarce. Schools were blatantly unequal in their offerings. The divisions that would become obvious to the world with the school integration crisis of 1974, and its long ugly aftermath, were smoldering largely out of view in 1967, a fire awaiting a match (June 2, 2017).

It is unclear how the peaceful protest escalated to violence, but police started to forcibly remove protestors from the Welfare Office, reportedly dragging women over broken glass. Hundreds of people began rioting in the streets, people started fires in local businesses, and stores were looted along Blue Hill Avenue. Over \$1.3 million in claims were filed as a result of the riot, but only \$240,000 was paid out by the city to pay for the physical damage of buildings and none for the missing or stolen items. Many business

owners did not return to the neighborhood (Johnson). Little policy change in the Welfare Office resulted from this riot, but the ramifications were long felt.

With the Civil Rights Movement the country saw a shift in public art such as mural art as a way for activists to build community and create a platform giving voice to people who had no other public outlet to share their message. Cities like Boston have a vast array of murals, and Christine Verret documented over 400 of them in her book *Boston Murals*. One of the oldest surviving murals in Boston Verret recorded is *Africa Is the Beginning* by Gary Rickson. It is painted on the Roxbury YMCA at 285 Martin Luther King Boulevard Jr., less than a mile away from the Grove Hall murals.

Gary Rickson was a member of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), a politically engaged black artist movement that started in 1965 and lasted until 1975. Painted in 1969, *Africa Is the Beginning* illustrates a pyramid below an eclipsed sun with the words “Africa Is the Beginning” in orange block lettering painted on a turquoise background. This mural is an example of how public art engages and empowers a community.

Accelerator artist Stephen Hamilton recalls his first time seeing *Africa Is the Beginning*:

Even with my limited 5-year-old understanding of the world, I knew what Africa was and that I was connected to it by blood and by history. Gary Rickson, the man who painted that mural in 1969 . . . taught me part of what that connection meant, and it was that knowledge that made me feel powerful, even before I knew the importance of being empowered.⁵

Hamilton demonstrates the impact public art can leave on the viewer. *Africa Is the Beginning* for Hamilton gave him a sense of legacy, place, and self-worth. Yet, this mural is a rare exception to the general tone of public art in Boston. Public art has the power to

⁵ <http://www.nowandthere.org/blog/2018/3/19/the-conscious-artist>

create a greater impact in a community than just the work itself, yet there are historic patterns of mostly conservative public art in Boston.

Boston's public art has a reputation from art critics as being conservative in nature. Greg Cook, a former art critic for WBUR in Boston writes in the introduction to his article "The Best Works of Public Art in Greater Boston, Ranked.", "Boston has some of the greatest 19th century bronze monuments in the nation, but overall, the collection is seen as too white, too male, too bronze, too dated, too dull."⁶ Cook's sentiments are echoed by other Boston art critics as he cites former Boston Globe art critic Sebastian Smee saying Boston's collection of public art is "frankly mediocre" and "relentlessly conservative." Globe columnist Yvonne Abraham has lamented public art in Boston is full of "stodgy legions of bronze figures depicting politicians and sporting or other heroes." With much of the public art in Boston seen as tame with little agenda past beautification of the city, and honoring historic figures, what needs to shift in Boston public art to embody the higher ideals of public art?

Street art has a shaky foundation in Boston. From the earlier murals of the 1960s and 1970s such as *Africa Is the Beginning* and *Knowledge Is Power, Stay In School* by Dana Chandler mural subject matter took a real shift, leaving most of the murals created in Boston to be little more than adding color and visual interest to Boston walls. Mural art in Boston, with few exceptions, mirrors the conservative tone of Boston public art. When asked in an interview for WBUR, Verret had this to say about the general theme of the Boston murals she captured in her photographs:

It's very conservative. There's nothing provocative. You've got a couple from [Shepard] Fairey . . . the most provocative of the whole book. So what does it tell me? I don't think people are even trying to . . . Somehow none of them are

⁶ <http://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/08/29/boston-best-public-art>

political. So it's different from other mural collections in other cities you might see.⁷

The medium of the mural is often associated with community and social revolution and used in cities like Los Angeles and Chicago in the 60s and 70s to invoke change, Boston's murals are generally devoid of provocation.

Christine Verret mentions Shepard Fairey, a street artist most well-known for creating Barak Obama's "Hope" image, as a rare example of provocative mural art in Boston. Fairey's relationship to Boston reflects the complex and conservative attitude some Boston officials have demonstrated in response to public art in the past. In 2000 Fairey was charged for placing a poster on an electrical box in Boston, and three days after he failed to go to court he was arrested on his way to his solo art exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Fairey pleaded guilty to two of the 13 charges in a plea deal in 2009. The plea deal included a \$2,000 payment to a graffiti removal organization, he can no longer carry tagging materials in Boston except for authorized art installations, and he must tell officials when he plans to visit Suffolk County (Tobin).

In an interview for WBUR Fairey speaks with Lisa Tobin, WBUR's senior podcast producer at the time, and explains how long the list of charges were and why he needed to take a plea deal, "The possibility of being convicted for a felony charge for putting up a sticker or a poster—it's crazy . . . And originally they were pushing for what could have amounted to 87 years in prison" (Tobin). With the potential of going to prison for 87 years with two daughters and a wife at home there seems little choice than to plead guilty to two charges. Yet the ramifications of this plea will affect the rest of Fairey's life as he must alert the Suffolk County every time he drives through. Some, including

⁷ <http://www.wbur.org/artery/2017/09/20/photographing-boston-murals>

Fairey, see this action more severe than the crime committed. Fairey goes on to say in his interview “It’s unfortunate that that’s how some people in the Boston Police Department thought that their time and resources should be used” (Tobin). This opens up the question what is vandalism and what is public art.

What does it say about a city who has a nine-year legal battle with an artist whose canvas is public space? There are legitimate concerns about where and when is an appropriate place to create public art. In a New York Times article about Fairey’s vandalism charges, Anne Swanson, the head of the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay, says her association contacted the police about all of Fairey’s images that started showing up in Back Bay leading up to his show at the Institute of Contemporary Art. “This is clearly just chronic vandalism,” Anne Swanson said “I voted for Obama, too, but I still don’t want to have to remove his face from 30 traffic signs” (Goodnough). To Swanson Fairey’s posters were nothing more than an act of defacing public property, a “vandal’s” doing. Yet Fairey argues that he gives the placement of his work great thought, “I don’t consider myself a tagger, and I feel like my methodology of integrating my work into public spaces has been with the consideration that we all have to live in our cities” (Tobin). Recognizing that we all have to share in public space, Fairey claims a “methodology” to how he uses space. Public space directly affects how we live and interact in the physical space of a city. It matters what we see when we walk down the street, and Fairey says he is considerate in how and where he places his art.

Who decides what is appropriate content for public space? What is the difference between a person defacing public property versus enhancing public property? The Grove Hall Public Art Program committee decided that the majority of the art funding would go

to murals, large-scale public art that changes the whole look of stories high space,
splashing the walls with bright colors that have the potential to transform the cityscape
and perhaps even the hearts of those who experience it.

Chapter II

The Grove Hall Murals in an Historic Context

This chapter looks American Murals from the 1930s through the 1970s

Murals of The New Deal

Art historians trace the rise of American muralism to the 1930s. As a result of programs created during President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, murals began to appear across America. Numerous art departments were created during this time. These programs included The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), 1933–1934, administered by the Civil Works Administration (CWA); the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (The Section), 1934 –1943; The Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), 1935–1943; the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), 1935–1938, administered by the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department; the Work Project Administration Art Program (WPA Art Program); and the Graphic Section of the War Services Division, 1942–1943. The New Deal art programs were the first time the American government recognized artists as workers, offering them a salary for their work; Harry Hopkins, who ran the WPA saw the need to provide jobs to Americans, not handouts, and that included artists (Venn, 56). As part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930s, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), over twenty-five hundred murals were commissioned and painted in schools, libraries, post offices, prisons, and hospitals (Park and Markowitz, 1992, 131). These locations are

frequented by various sectors of the population and requires no effort by the individual to intentionally seek out art. These murals became part of the backdrop of everyday life.

The New Deal mural projects affirmed the important role of mural art within American culture. Art historian Cher Krause Knight writes in *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism* that the New Deal was meant to achieve much more than the basic physical needs of the American people. She notes that “the New Deal also positioned the federal government as a primary agent of social change and enlightenment, entrusted to ensure the welfare of all citizens” (3). The New Deal had lofty goals that strove to uplift the American people in more than just their physical needs through a particularly dark time of poverty and unemployment. The act of bringing art into public spaces across America is enough to demonstrate how important the New Deal public art programming meant to weave art into the fabric of American life, however the New Deal arts funding did have its limitations. As Knight states, the New Deal was full of “shortcomings” yet the national emphasis on funding the arts as part of the American revival efforts that spurred the rise of public art, and solidified its place in the American landscape.

Art historian Francis O’Connor made a similar observation stating the New Deal murals validated murals as an important form of American art in his 1969 book *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, when he wrote that “at the time it was a revelation to many people in America that the country even had artists.” As a result of the New Deal murals, citizens began to accept and see artists as part of the fabric that created the American workforce. Overall, the New Deal introduced art and artists to the public sphere was radical and has lasting impact on America to this day.

Simply recognizing artists as part of the workforce and commissioning murals in community spaces such as school, banks, and post offices was radical in and of itself. This brought art to people who otherwise may never be exposed to it. School children, a working person waiting to deposit a check or a mother in line for stamps did not need extra time, money, or even to go out of their patterns of life to be exposed to art. Art was brought in to their routine. Yet, the art commissioned was not meant to be avante-garde or academic, but merely a representation of contemporary American life that felt relatable to the general public (1992:132). The images commissioned were mostly of daily life such as Maxine Albrow's mural in California "Orange Harvest" depicting industrious farmers harvesting and sorting oranges and Bernard Zakheim's mural "Library" where people of all ages are enjoying reading periodicals and books in the library. The majority of the murals painted during the New Deal era reflect an idyllic picture of the working class of America, safe, relatable art that did little more than beautify the streets.

The Wall of Respect (1967)

After the New Deal programs ended in 1943, strong mural movements reemerged in the 1960s led by black and Chicano communities in relation to the radical politics of the time. The roots of the Chicano mural movement go back to the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, known as Los Tres Grandes (The Three Great Muralists), all three of whom greatly influenced and inspired the mural movement of the 1930s. Judy de Baca, co-founder of SPARC (the Social and Public Art Resource Center in Los Angeles) and the woman who conceived of the mural *The Great Wall* muses in the article "The Art of the Mural" on the popularity of murals in the Chicano community:

Perhaps it was abundance of concrete, or the year-round painting season, or the city full of Mexican workers that made Los Angeles the place where murals began to be a predominant art form. Or perhaps it was because an entire population – the majority of the city – had been “disappeared” in textbooks, in the media, in cultural markers of place, and needed to find a way to reclaim a city of Mexican and indigenous roots.

de Baca’s emphasis on the importance of murals in giving voice to an under-represented population can be applied to the Grove Hall Public Art Project. Murals have the power to elevate and give a platform to a community to shape a movement towards justice and identity.

Regarding the African American community, Dr. Kellie Jones, an art historian and curator, discusses the work of critically important, but under-recognized black artists of the 1960s in *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*:

It is this idea of a “total well-being” that I want to retrieve here as the intersection, too, between art and civil rights. Art was also a way to access or extend the sense of well-being, as numerous artists during this period understood...In this way, creativity and beauty encouraged and helped engender a feeling of individual satisfaction, self-love, and in this sense health (12-13).

Jones argues that these civil rights artists offered black people a window of love, beauty, and representation in a time where America was rife with segregation, aggression, and violence towards them. More directly related to murals, in 1967, members of the Visual Art Workshop of the organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) came together, led by William Walker, to create the mural *The Wall of Respect*, which depicted sixteen role-models and heroes from the black community, including Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, W.E.B. Dubois, Aretha Franklin, and Harriet Tubman. This project sparked the mural movement of black artists who created over a thousand murals in inner cities between

1967 and 1975, changing the look of cityscapes across America (*The Rise, The Fall, and the Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement*, 22).

Unlike the New Deal murals that were sanctioned by the government, *The Wall of Respect* was a grass roots project. The group did not get permission before painting this now iconic mural. From the first inception of the project OBAC, led by Walker, solicited community involvement. The community gave to the project as it was being developed and local businesses donated paint supplies. The Wall of Respect brought such a sense of place to the community that rival gangs, the Almighty P. Stone Nation and the Disciples, declared the site to be neutral ground. Alan Barnett states about *The Wall of Respect*:

This wall was created to beautify our community. “Beautify” implied more than the physical attractiveness the mural would bring to the community. It meant that the wall was painted to raise the awareness in local people of their soul, creativity, and power, a consciousness that was expressed by the then-new affirmation “Black is beautiful.”

Barnett describes the power he believes *The Wall of Respect* had on the 1960s black community in its ability to inspire change, to empower and to motivate people.

What differentiated the murals of the 1960s and 70s from that of the New Deal is the murals of the 60s and 70s often carried a strong political message that engaged and inspired the unrepresented communities. The community often took part in their creation, giving a sense of ownership and invested meaning to the work. Jeff Donaldson writes in his article “The Rise, The Fall, and the Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement”:

The outdoor mural movement of the 1960s introduced a distinctly new genre and reintroduced the moral dimension absent from European art for more than a century. It ushered in heightened respectability for the politically engaged African American artist and paved the way for the rise of present-day Afrocentric styles in art. This movement brought art to the people, and, at the same time, permitted people to participate in the process . . . The movement can be credited with

uplifting the spirits of the people by recognizing their heritage, honoring their chosen heroes and focusing their righteous anger on real issues and the choices available to them. It is also important that the murals served to enhance the quality of life in African American communities by beautifying the surroundings and providing positive and powerful visual imagery of black people writ large (26).

This combination of not only “bringing art to the people” but inviting people to come together and be part of the process—from vision to creation—helped to invigorate a greater sense of community and pride where the art was displayed. It created a sense of place through mural art in urban areas across America.

The Great Wall of Los Angeles (1978)

In 1976 Judy Baca co-founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) with, Christina Schlesinger, Donna Deitch in Venice California. Just as Los Tres Grandes painted murals to give voice to immigrant populations and those underserved in America, SPARC’s mission is the same. SPARC believes public art serves a purpose to tell a story and has the potential of forming ties between artists and residents inspiring community. The SPARC Mission Statement reads:

SPARC’s intent is to examine what we choose to memorialize through public art, to devise and innovate excellent art pieces; and ultimately, to provide empowerment through participatory processes to residents and communities excluded from civic debate . . . a collaboration between artists and communities, resulting in art which rises from within the community, rather than being imposed upon it.

The emphasis of collaboration between artist and community gives murals the potential to have a powerful impact beyond the beautification of the city. From the crystallization of the idea to involving the community in the creation, a mural not only carries meaning to the spectator, but creates bonds in the community that can, and as SPAC has shown,

span decades. The physical act of involving the community uplifts the community, empowering action and giving voice and representation to communities that are often overlooked by “civic debate.”

The Great Wall of Los Angeles is a half-mile long mural in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel of the San Fernando Valley. The concept for the mural was conceived by Judy Baca in 1975 and depicts the history of the California ethnic peoples from prehistoric times to the 1950s. Judy Baca reflects on her experience of creating the *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*:

In 1975 when the Great Wall was still a dream, I never imagined it would lead me, the more than 400 young “Mural Makers” and the 35 other artists on my team through such a moving set of experiences. Nor could I have imagined that 27 years from the date the first paint was applied to the wall that it would still be a work in progress. When I first saw the wall, I envisioned a long narrative of another history of California; one which included ethnic peoples, women and minorities who were so invisible in conventional text book accounts. . . . While our sense of our individual families’ places in history took form, we became family to one another. Working toward the achievement of a difficult common goal shifted our understandings of each other and most importantly of ourselves.⁸

The thoughtful research that went into the creating of the *Great Wall* of the ethnic peoples of California fostered both a sense of empathy and understanding in the community as it gave place and context to the ancestors of the first people of California whose stories were forgotten from history books.

A mural is far more than just the paint on the wall. The *Great Wall* is an exemplary example of bringing hundreds of people together over a generation to create community through art, and it is still a work in progress. The images are a pictorial

⁸ <http://sparcinla.org/programs/the-great-wall-mural-los-angeles/>

storytelling of people who history books have overlooked. In a documentary on *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*⁹ Judy Baca talks about the impact this mural can have on minority youth:

[We are] Telling the story of the people, the story that was left out of the history books, the scars in ourselves in sense that made it impossible for us to feel the self-esteem that one feels from knowing the history of your own contributions. As long as we did not know that, that these young people did not know that, they did not know their own story, and were not able to tell their story to others and to have it heard. They would continue to see themselves as insignificant, as people who did not affect the place in which they lived, as powerless.¹⁰

By involving hundreds of youth, and empowering them with knowledge of where they came from the *Great Wall* gives people context of who their ancestors are, celebrates them, and fosters a greater sense of community as a result. This wall was some of the first images in public art that illustrated the deportation of Mexican immigrants in southern California, the internment of Japanese in Manzanar, and strikes. These are powerful events that often neglected from traditional American History textbooks. By giving a sense of place and understanding of the past murals like this can shift a person's sense of self-esteem and ambition.

As murals are outdoor art they are exposed to the elements. The paint will eventually fade, peel, and chip away. SPAC is committed to not only to preserve and restore *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* but continue its story by adding four more panels that will consist of images from the 1960s – 1990s. This is a living breathing mural. One

⁹ <http://gwdvd.sparcinla.org/the-great-wall-of-los-angeles-movie-abridged/>

¹⁰ <http://gwdvd.sparcinla.org/the-great-wall-of-los-angeles-movie-abridged/>

that is not stagnant, but transforms grey expanse of concrete to a purposeful place that empowers people by developing knowledge, skills, and self-worth.

Boston Murals in the 1960s and 1970s

The Summerthing Program began in Boston in 1968 and was a collaboration between the city of Boston and the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) to ease the racial and sociopolitical tensions in Boston through public art projects. The Summerthing Program was the vision of Adele Seronde, who saw the need for community involvement with the mural efforts in as a way to quell the racial unrest in Boston:

One of the things we didn't want to do was have artists doing it all. . . . The murals have been particularly valuable to the black community as a kind of forum. As propaganda they're instructive, they make a sociological statement, but perhaps more importantly, they're yards and yards of metaphor for people who really lack a channel (Cockcroft, 80).

The Summering Program lasted from 1968 to 1974, ending in 1974 because of a lack of funding. The Summering Program was born out of fear of racial tensions causing violence in the Boston. Once the threat of physical violence began to wane Federal Funding for public arts programs were no longer a priority issue in the country and Federal Funds were cut. Yet in 1970 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and Boston city funds gave the Summerthing an operating budget of \$425,000 funding 1500 community murals, events, and playground installations (Barnett, 410). Despite it's rather flawed impetuous it did good work for the city. The murals that came out of the Summering program are still some of the most provocative murals in the city because artists were given freedom to paint what they wanted. With few exceptions most recent murals in Boston shifted to the mundane.¹¹ Although the artist could decide what to paint, oversight from the governing board

¹¹ <http://www.wbur.org/artery/2017/09/20/photographing-boston-murals>

outside the artist community gave the artists little cause to take proactive steps to build community and as such when the funding ran out in 1974 Boston was left without an organized group of public art creators. Dana Chandler recalls her work with the Summering Program, “The lack of artist control furthered by this situation left artists highly vulnerable to changes in administration or cutbacks in funding. When the political situation cooled down in the early 1970s, the money for inner-city murals with artistically strong social communication was reduced” (Cockcroft, 55). Seeing public art programs as a partnership between artists, community, and government is crucial for their sustainability and longevity.

Unlike Judy Baca’s approach where she felt a part of the community and was invested in the project each step of the way, even to this day. The Summering program suffered in part because of an “us and them” mentality. The program was formed as a response to the racial tensions in the city and the country as a whole. When de Baca describes the value of the Great Wall she uses inclusive language saying “we” as a whole, not just a specific sub-set of the population need to hear the story of Los Angeles. Seronde’s tone is different and separate as she discusses the mural project of Boston as having “value for the black community” and believes these murals to be “propaganda” to “channel” the current energy of the time. Yet the artists were allowed to paint whatever subject matter they chose. As a result of the Summering program 35 murals were painted in the first year and a half of the program, including the *Africa Is the Beginning* by Gary Rickson, adding empowering public art that gives people to this day a sense of place and history in Boston.

Smaller city-run art projects in Boston continued after the Summering program. In 1975 Mark Favermann was the Director of Visual and Environmental Arts of the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs of Boston, Massachusetts and as part of his duties he oversaw the creation of public art projects in Boston. In an article he wrote for MIT a couple years after his term he recounts his work on two mural projects in Boston, one in the North End and the other in South Boston, which he called the most "innovative" public art work he worked on during his time in the Mayor's office (Favermann, 298).

In South Boston twelve murals were commissioned and painted on security gates on shops on West Broadway Street. The City Council saw a real need to bring the community of South Boston together as there was considerable unrest in the community as a result of desegregation of the schools, and this mural project was an opportunity to do just that. At the South Boston Businessmen's Association Mark Favermann proposed the concept and the community decided the theme of "Pride of Southie" depicting notable historical events and landmarks of the district. There was an open call to artists ages eighteen and older, who lived in the metropolitan Boston area, to submit mural proposals. All submissions were judged and voted on by members of the South Boston community, and residents worked with the artists to paint the murals.

One of the muralists, Arnie Clapman, said about his mural proposal for the project: "I submitted my sketch with the desire to provide South Boston people with an object of pride combined with humor to relieve a general feeling of seriousness affecting the community and to provide art that people can enjoy" (Favermann, 298). The combination of thematic sense of place and pride in South Boston as well as a goal to lift the spirits of the community brings this project from just a beautification effort to one

that fosters community involvement and collaboration. You can hear in Arnie's sentiment that the tone of neighborhood was tense. These murals created an avenue to elevate the general mood and provide levity to ease the anxiety and unrest that was felt by many.

Chapter III.

Murals as a Medium, as Urban Development, and as Socially Engaged Art

This Chapter looks at murals as a tool for urban development and social engagement

Stages of Creating a Mural

Murals are a multi-step process: from conception to completion each step asks the artist to thoughtfully examine their concept through a scaled visual lens as well as how contextually it is relevant to the community it will be placed. Murals require an existing wall to be painted on. Before an artist paints there is already an existing canvas with history and a physical location. The Department of Art and Art History at The University of Utah outlines the process of mural design.

First the artist investigates a location for the mural to make sure the mural physically works with the environment. He/she needs to research the demographics, municipality, aesthetics, and perspectives of the neighborhood as well as speak with local members of the community to better understand their values. Finally looking at the history, political climate and social context is important for proof of concept. Because murals are largescale paintings on expansive walls the design phase includes various strategies to create an effective mural. How a mural will be viewed requires careful consideration. Will people be able to view it up close, what will be able to be viewed clearly at short distance verses further away? How does the mural look from different angles? Murals are usually the product of many different people actually applying paint

to the wall, and as such the mural needs to have different elements that are accessible for any skill level to be able to participate in. Utah University students selected to have their mural to be painted are required to present to their classmates for feedback and refinement, then present to the mayor and city council, and finally present to the community and allow the community to vote for the mural they feel reflects their community and the surrounding neighborhood.¹²

Once the proof of concept for a mural is approved bringing it to life requires a glaze painting process. First a gesso layer, a hard compound of plaster of Paris or whiting in glue, is applied as a base layer to prime the area. Then the wall is chalked with a numbered grid to map out the mural to scale. The mural lines are drawn first with chalk and then cleaned-up with paint. The glaze painting process involves many layers of paint from darkest to lightest to create depth in perspective. Most murals are painted using indoor/outdoor acrylic paint because it is water permeable meaning the wall is able to “breathe.” If one were to use an oil or enamel paints the mural would deteriorate much faster because as the mural is exposed to the elements with temperature and moisture changes the paint peels from the wall because of its impermeability to water. The most stable colors to use are earth tones and black. Blues and violets tend to only last about five to ten years in direct sunlight.¹³

¹² <https://www.art.utah.edu/murals/mural-making-process/>

¹³ Ibid.

Murals as a tool for Urban Development

Murals involve a spectrum of people from initial design to final painting and require the community and government to work together. From the walls used for the project, the subject matter, the artists, and the community that aids in its creation, murals are cooperative endeavors. These cooperative endeavors lead to alliance building, which, in their essay “Reconceiving the Community Development Field,” social policy specialists Ronald Ferguson and Sara Stoutland have identified as the key to successful community programs:

To achieve sustainable momentum toward the ideals of community development, the field needs alliances of many types, including many that span several levels and sectors and some to do political battle against opposing interests. We argue that four questions of trust (regarding motives, competence, dependability, and collegiality) together with capacity, self-interest, and power will determine which alliances form and succeed. With regard to all types of alliances, three promising routes to a more effective community development system are to help individuals and organizations become more competent, dependable, and collegial as current or potential allies; to find and evaluate allies; and to manage divisive tensions that form inside alliances (*Urban Problems and Community Development*, 35-36).

When analyzing the success of a mural project it is important to determine how or if it furthered community development based on levels of community and government involvement. Ferguson and Stoutland identify motives and self-interest as components of successful community development. If the community does not see how the project will aid them and they do not have a personal vested interest in the process the project will fall short of its potential impact. Too much oversight from the government can lessen the community engagement. Like the Summering Program, without the personal investment and motivation from the community once government funding ran out the program faded

quickly. In *Community Murals: The People's Art*, Alan Barnett writes about the positive impact of murals on a community:

The significance of the murals lies first of all in what they have done for the people of their neighborhoods, union locals, schools, and social service centers where they have been painted. But their importance lies also in the far-reaching example they and their communities have set for the rest of us. The murals are in fact mirrors that show us what we are, what we could be, and how. They have indicated the racism, sexism, economic exploitation of society and helped bring people together to overcome them. Furthermore, the murals have begun to reconnect art, ordinary work, and community (17).

Both sources highlight the multifaceted ways that murals can contribute to urban development. Barnett addresses the varied layers in which we can evaluate a mural's impact on the community both in the immediate neighborhood and on a larger scale. Murals can be “mirrors” for us as a society to gain a sense of place and a sense of identity.

Murals as Socially Engaged Art

Art critic and theorist Nato Thompson has written two significant books on socially engaged art, *Living as Form* and *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century*, that provide a useful context for evaluating murals as socially engaged art. He offers ways in which socially engaged art create great waves of change. He observes:

So, ours is primarily a cultural crisis—rather than an economic or environmental one—resulting in the inability of institutions to question their ways of thinking, or the rigidity of their protocols and silos. It is with in this radical context that we must question the role of art and humanities and their contingent cultural institutions of pedagogy, production, display, and distribution. A more functional relationship between art and the everyday is urgently needed, through which artists can act as interlocutors across this polarized territory, intervening in the debate itself and mediating new forms of acting and living (*Living as Form*, 58).

Here Thompson emphasizes how art can be a bridge, acting as a “mediator” in a time where the people have little faith in institutions feeling they are ineffective in creating change. Socially engaged art has the power to bring people together for a common good.

However, there are challenges to studying and analyzing the impact of socially engaged art. Socially engaged art is often reliant on the specific context of time and often ignored by art critics because it is not easily defined or contained to a marketable space.

Thompson writes in his introduction to *Living as Form*:

To be fair, this kind of work does not hang well in a museum, and it isn't commercially viable. Furthermore, social practice art has lacked a shared critical language and comprehensive historic documentation. Creative Time's own engagement with the social was often dismissed in an art world that prefers to fame artists as commodity makers rather than change makers, and where many assert that politics and art have no place together (Thompson, 8).

Despite the challenges of truly defining what classifies as socially engaged art it is possible to contextualize public art to evaluate its effectiveness by seeing it through varied lenses. Just as it takes layers of paint to create a mural, evaluating each layer of social, geographical, and historic context is useful in addressing the impact of art in a public space.

Murals have the power to engage and give voice to a community that may not feel heard. The collaborative nature and municipal and community involvement of murals make them a unique and important part of urban revitalization efforts. Murals such as the Grove Hall murals have the potential to conjugate a sense of place, reinforce a community's identity, and inspire individual viewers.

Chapter IV

Grove Hall Murals and their Artists

The Grove Hall murals are part of a larger revitalization effort in Grove Hall. The Boston Main Streets program is a public-private initiative of the City of Boston and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Created in 1995, it is the first urban, multi-district Main Street program in the United States. Its mission is to revitalize Boston's neighborhood commercial districts through design, technical, and financial support.¹⁴ Artists submitted grant proposals for public art funding and those who were awarded these grants worked in part with the Boston Main Streets program. The three artists selected to create murals in Grove Hall are Robert 'Problak' Gibbs, Victor "Marka27" Quiñonez, and David "Don Rmx" Sepulveda. In the case of the mural artists selected for the Grove Hall Public Art Project, all of the artists have strong connections to communities of color in Boston. Even more, the artists have existing murals in Boston as evidence of a sustained relationship with the community. Because of the collaborative nature of murals, it is important to understand the quality of relationship an artist creating a mural develops with the community in which the mural is located.

Boston has a vast array of murals, and Christine Verret documented over 400 of them in her book *Boston Murals*. When asked in an interview for WBUR, Verret had this to say about the general theme of the Boston murals she captured:

¹⁴ <http://www.greatergrovehall.org/about>

It's very conservative. There's nothing provocative. You've got a couple from [Shepard] Fairey . . . the most provocative of the whole book. So what does it tell me? I don't think people are even trying to . . . Somehow none of them are political. So it's different from other mural collections in other cities you might see.¹⁵

Even in the medium of mural, a public art form that has so often been used in cities like Los Angeles and Chicago to invoke change, Boston's murals are generally devoid of provocation. How do the Grove Hall murals add to the dialogue in the community, are they just beautification efforts from the city or is there more they have to say?

Robert 'Problak' Gibbs – *Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life*

Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life.



Figure 1. *Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life.*

Mural painted by Robert 'Problak' Gibbs, located at UCERM Empowerment Center at 324 Blue Hill Ave. Photo taken by author.

¹⁵ "How One Woman Came To Photograph (Nearly) Every Mural Around Boston"

One of the selected artists, Robert 'Problak' Gibbs, is from Boston and has been creating graffiti and other forms of public art for decades in the Boston community.¹⁶ In an interview, Gibbs described his roots in Boston and the reason for the subject of his mural *Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life*:

Being Boston-raised, I wanted to pay respect and homage to areas that made me the artist I am today. . . . I graduated from the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School that is literally down the street from the wall that I painted. I wanted to “Breathe Life” back into the neighborhood that helped me launch my gift into the universe. I developed an understanding of the need for positive messaging in our communities and my responsibility to produce artwork that could resonate with so many people, have visual impact, reflect the people of the area, and celebrate our history.¹⁷

Here, Gibbs reveals his long history with his neighborhood, growing up and going to school just blocks away from where he painted *Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life* and how his deep respect and gratitude for the community informed his mural in Grove Hall. Gibbs sees his art as a platform where he carries a “responsibility” to the community to share positive messaging including representing people of the community and honoring the place of Grove Hall itself.

Afro Futurism/ Breathe Life features a young African-American boy blowing sparks of light into the air through what looks like a miniature house (See figure 1). He is surrounded by brilliant colors of blues, purples, and yellows and appears to be floating in cosmic space. The mural spans the length of the building and its three-story height, diagonally painted so half the building remains the original brick color underneath it. From Gibbs comments about his work the sparks of light may represent creative energy

¹⁶ <http://pro-blak.squarespace.com/about/>

¹⁷ <https://www.boston.gov/news/five-artists-selected-public-art-projects-grove-hall-business-district>

can bring color into the world. The plain brick may represent where the possibility for this creative energy to expand to.

The name of the mural reinforces Gibbs intention to invoke pride and a sense of place and identity to the community of Grove Hall. The choice to entitle the mural *Afro Futurism / Breathe Life* reminds us that many people in the community came together because they were displaced in the past. The Grove Hall community today started in large part because African American families were being denied FHA loans in other parts of Boston. Afro Futurism is a relatively new term referring to a cultural esthetic coined by Mark Derby in the 1990s and bridges African Diaspora culture with technology. In Derby's 1994 *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* he argues:

Afrofuturism is not only a subgenre of science fiction. Instead, it is a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences.¹⁸

African Diaspora refers to communities of people around the world whose ancestors are originally from Africa who were enslaved and shipped to the Americas. Through the same shared common experience of African Diaspora Afrofuturism can be seen as an artistic lens of speculating the future for the African American communities.

Gibbs said this mural is for the place he was raised, the “neighborhood that helped me launch my gift into the universe.” The colors and textures reflect that sense the “universe” and the nonsquitor of the boy playing a house like a trumpet reflects the science fiction of Afrofuturism. The little boy, who may be a representation of Gibbs

¹⁸ <http://sdonline.org/42/afrofuturism-science-fiction-and-the-history-of-the-future/>

himself as a boy, blowing sparkles like fairy dust illuminating the world in color and hope.

Gibbs creates art to share with the African American community. He takes his art to the streets where all can appreciate it, “The art that I do is for our people, it’s our voice. I use it through the lens of hip-hop—I’m speaking a language that’s in our barbershops, in our community centers.”¹⁹

Victor “Marka27” Quiñonez – *Love Thyself*

Love Thyself.



Figure 2. *Love Thyself.*

Mural painted by Victor "Marka27" Quiñonez., located at 199 Quincy Street in Grove Hall. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Victor “Marka27” Quiñonez was also selected to paint a mural for the Grove Hall Public Art Project. Not originally from Boston like Gibbs, Quiñonez was born in Juarez,

¹⁹ <https://digboston.com/outside-the-spray-paint>

Mexico and grew up in East Dallas. He came to Boston when he received a scholarship to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) in 1999. During his time in school he lived in Jamaica Plain and Roxbury. He says his time at SMFA opened up a whole new world for him.²⁰

Originally his mural was titled *Sacred Heart*, but Quiñonez renamed the mural to *Love Thyself* (See figure 2). The project was announced in November of 2017 and was not completed until May of 2018 because the placement of the mural could not be settled on. In the process of finding a permanent home for the mural two developers passed on having the mural painted on their property saying it was “too powerful.”²¹ Finally, it found a home and you can see the completed mural covering one complete side of 199 Quincy Street, a three-story apartment building.

Love Thyself depicts an image of a black woman with her natural afro hairstyle. Her eyes are closed. She holds her hands in a meditative pose and is surrounded with bright, geometric patterns that border her face and body. At the very center of her chest is a bright turquoise heart, with lotus flowers and arum lilies intertwined around her arms and body. Quiñonez refers to his aesthetic as “neo-indigenous,” paying homage to Native, African and Latinx ancestries.²² So what makes this mural so controversial? What about *Love Thyself* caused two developers to pass on this project? Is it because of the historically conservative trend in Boston public art over the last few decades that heightens the contrast of past murals compared to this one?

²⁰ <http://marka27.com/fineart/>

²¹ “City-Funded Afrocentric Mural - Once Deemed 'Too Powerful' - Has Found Its Place In Dorchester.”

²² <http://www.wbur.org/artery/2018/07/10/dorchester-afrocentric-street-theory-mural>

When it was still in the conception phase Quiñonez said he intended *Sacred Heart* to encourage humanity to respect one's mind, body and soul. Quiñonez says the heart in the *Sacred Heart* mural represents the most important and vital organ that keeps people going, and also represents love.²³ Along with the general intent of universal respect for all of humanity Quiñonez sees his mural work as part of a larger needed shift to the public art in Boston. In a recent interview about *Love Thyself* Quiñonez said:

The more you show the beauty of different cultures, the more you're going to make people curious and want to know more about them In Boston, if we paint a person of color on a wall, it's always someone like Big Papi, and I want to change that.²⁴

What is it about a peaceful black woman in a meditative pose that developers view as “too powerful”? What does “too powerful” mean? Powerful implies there is a feeling reaction, an impact as a result of experiencing something. Why is there a negative connotation with the word powerful? If the real reason for passing on having this mural be painted on a developer's building is because it's powerful, that means they view power as a negative. This becomes a larger conversation over how this mural may push comfort levels and how Quiñonez intends his art to be far homage to a local sports icon and engage the community in a dialogue. Quiñonez comments that he uses his art as a way to breakdown fear and uplift the community:

I'm trying to fight the fear that certain people are trying to instill, that all immigrants are criminals or if you're from Mexico you're a thief or rapist,” he said. “It's the oldest trick in the book, demonize the others so you can divide and conquer. When I paint, it's to empower and inspire.”²⁵

²³ “Five Artists Selected for Public Art Projects in Grove Hall Business District.”

²⁴ “City-Funded Afrocentric Mural - Once Deemed 'Too Powerful' - Has Found Its Place In Dorchester.”

²⁵ “City-Funded Afrocentric Mural - Once Deemed 'Too Powerful' - Has Found Its Place In Dorchester.”

Some developers may see *Love Thyself* as “Too powerful” but many in the Grove Hall community see this mural as a representation of themselves. Corneilus "Chef Biggie" Lawson works at Commonwealth Kitchen on Quincy Street and grew up in the neighborhood, and when he heard people were calling *Love Thyself* “too powerful” he responded: “Too powerful? What were they scared of?” he asked. “My wife was the first one to comment on it, and she just thought it was amazing. It’s a just a strong, black lady just being beautiful. It makes me happy.”²⁶ Jojo Vallera said of the mural: “All I can say is God bless the artist. It captures everything this generation needs to see. It captures the third eye, the heart and the soul, and it captures a black woman, with her natural hair, no less! When I see her hair, I see my hair So when I see this, I see myself.”²⁷ The community sees this mural as something not only beautiful but empowering. Lawson refers to the woman depicted as “strong” and Vallera sees this as a message of inspiration for this generation. The historic pattern of benign public art can start to shift through murals like *Love Thyself*.

I reached out to Verret to ask her to elaborate on her thoughts about the safe nature of Boston murals, and if she thinks the three Grove Hall murals may effect change and increase the discourse in the Boston public art sphere. Verret had this to say about artist Quiñonez:

MARKA style hasn’t changed and he cannot as long as he paints in Boston. He refined it and again, emphasizes on culture, ethnicity, diversity and visual colorful beauty. Nothing provocative, hurtful, contrary of thoughts or offensive to anyone. Murals in Boston are not used, nor accepted as a visual communication of revolt, discontentment, disagreement that is political, human or animal rights. Instead, these issues might be raised in murals but it generally emphasizes pride, appreciation and accomplishments, local celebrities, diversity, cultures, sports,

²⁶ “City-Funded Afrocentric Mural - Once Deemed 'Too Powerful' - Has Found Its Place In Dorchester.”

²⁷ “City-Funded Afrocentric Mural - Once Deemed 'Too Powerful' - Has Found Its Place In Dorchester.”

communities, etc.

Here Verret recognizes the qualities of Quiñonez's work as carrying the inclusive message of seeing beauty in diversity, yet she acknowledges that outside that general message he is limited to not expressing specific issues like politics or human rights. Boston as a whole, Verret asserts, is still not open to hearing about matters of discontent through public art.

On a panel discussion about mural art in Boston Quiñonez had this to say, "Keeping an open mind is one of the most progressive things Boston can do as far as cultivating an arts culture . . . We're just getting started."²⁸ It is in saying "I don't know, tell me more." The simple act of listening without prejudgment, that is progressive today in Boston.

²⁸ "Outside the Spray Paint."

David “Don Rimx” Sepulveda – *Powerful Knowledge*

Powerful Knowledge.



Figure 3. *Powerful Knowledge.*

Mural painted by David 'Don Rimx' Sepulveda, located at 41 Geneva Ave. Photo taken by author.

David “Don Rimx” Sepulveda, the third selected muralist, does not have a personal story that includes living in Boston. He was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

However, his family lived in the public housing development, Nemesio R Canales, which at the time had a very high crime rate, and he was witness to drugs and gun violence as part of his everyday life. These are some of the same conditions experienced by residents of the Grove Hall area. Sepulveda says it is his parents’ encouragement of his art by sending him to weekend art classes at the local art school that kept him clean and on the track to a positive future.²⁹ The artistic connections he made while developing as an artist

²⁹ <http://donrimx.com/bio/>

include artists in the Boston community. It is through these relationships he came to create murals in Boston. In an email correspondence with me he wrote:

Well I do not have a direct relationship with the community of Boston or Grove Hall for a long time because I do not live there, my relationship has been through colleagues who live there and I have been able to visit and have invited me to share in different art projects. This relationship that I have with my friends has awoken me wanting to be more interested in the history and cultural legacy that these communities keep.

Later Sepulveda goes on to say about his mural for Grove Hall, “I hope that the mural somehow helps to create constructive conversations and dialogues that inspire creativity and further develop the intellect.” These reflections highlight the reciprocal nature of creating community art.

In the process of creation, he “awoke” to want to deepen his personal understanding of the Boston community, while his intention for his mural was to inspire constructive dialogue and a thirst for greater knowledge in the community. It is for this reason he decided the subject of his mural would be the Nobel Peace Prize recipient and icon of democracy and social justice, Nelson Mandela, titled *Powerful Knowledge* (See figure 3). Sepulveda says the reason he titled his mural *Powerful Knowledge* is because:

I wanted a title that would relate to the art and the place where the piece is located in the community. Being next to a public Library of the community helped me a lot to choose this title, because it is a place in the community where a lot of information and powerful wisdom is stored and it is a place where you will learn and develop your intellect.

When I asked Sepulveda what inspired him to feature Nelson Mandela for his mural he had a few important reasons:

I decided to take inspiration from the figure of Nelson Mandela because he is a human being that represents wisdom. Mandela visited Boston four months after

his release as part of a series of visits he came to the United States, but Boston was very important to him because 2 of his daughters lived there while he was in jail. Mandela in his speeches said “If there is any resource I can do is that the youth of Boston and the United States should take the initiative to receive the highest education possible” that for me is very valuable and powerful.

It is through thoughtful consideration of the place and the people that mural art can be more than just a beautification project. Sepulveda thought about the site where he would paint, the library. The library is a wealth of knowledge, a place of “powerful wisdom.” And from there he expanded his concept to who embodied wisdom, which led to Nelson Mandela. Mandela strongly believed in education and saw it as a tool for empowerment. Mandela had ties to Boston through his visits and because his daughters were in Boston while he was in prison. By choosing a heroic and inspiring figure that also has personal ties to Boston makes this mural all the more connected and therefore possibility more meaningful to the community.

These three murals all center around one main African-America person. They all are painted in vibrant color that bring stories-high dull walls to life. Each artist intends for their mural to inspire hope, creativity, and a sense of pride for in the neighborhood. These murals resonate communal energy from first conception, to creation, to the present where they stand today.

Chapter V.

The Grove Hall Murals and their Impact as Socially Engaged Art in Boston

The Grove Hall murals brighten the streets and splash color on what were once blank walls. When I was photographing *Afro Futurism / Breathe of Life* for this thesis a local gentleman stopped on the street to admire the mural and take a picture himself. “It’s really something isn’t it?” he said to me. He went on to tell me he has lived in Grove Hall all his life and he loves walking by this new art that adds color to his streets. We both looked at the mural of that little boy that symbolizes hope and creativity, then went our separate ways.

Public art has the power to inspire conversation and connection. Yet there are many factors that play into its creation that can cause controversy. In the introduction of *Critical Issues in Public Art :Content, Context, and Controversy* Harriet Senie writes:

With its built-in social focus, public art would seem to be an ideal genre for a democracy. Yet, since its inception, issues surrounding its appropriate form and placement, as well as funding, have made it an object of controversy more often than a subject of consensus or celebration For meaningful understanding of public art as an expression of culture or intellectual achievement, it must be viewed in the complex matrix in which it was conceived, commissioned, built, and finally received (xi).

The Grove Hall murals are no exception to the issues that comes with the creation of public art. It took multiple offers and rejections from developers to finally place Victor “Marka27” Quiñonez Mural *Love Thyself* because to some it was “too powerful.” Yet eventually it found a home, and with its creation it breathes life and vibrancy to Quincy Street.

Murals can give those who see it a sense of identity, a voice, a way of feeling seen. Through the creation of murals community can form, and through the lasting presence of a mural a forgotten corridor can become a landmark. Yet what metrics can measure the success of a public art program and the art it produces? This chapter will review different lenses we can use to examine the impact of the Grove Hall public art project on the community as socially engaged art.

One metric is the degree of creative freedom for the artist. The New Deal brought artists and art into the public sphere and into daily life, yet it they were restricted to benign themes the public could easily relate to. Although the specific language from the CNI grant application is no longer available on Boston.gov the language for the annual grant funding from the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture, Boston Cultural Council, where the CNI funding for public arts came from reads:

The Program Grant is sought to enhance the quality of life, the economy, and the design of the city through the arts by investing in cultural organizations and cultural programs. The grant will help to increase access to the arts in areas of the City not already well served by cultural opportunities, to foster access to the arts to populations who don't typically have ready access to the arts, to elevate the work of Boston's creatives, to inspire the creation of new works, and to support the achievement and provision of excellent, high quality arts and culture in the City of Boston.³⁰

This grant's criteria gives artists no direction of what or who to paint and instead focuses on what the council hopes to achieve as a result of the art: more access to communities not well served or who do not have ready access to the arts. There were no specific guidelines for art submission for the CNI Grant except that the hope is to create a sense of community and place for the neighborhood to improve its cityscape through new

³⁰ <https://www.boston.gov/departments/arts-and-culture/boston-cultural-council/application-and-requirements/>

public art. When I corresponded with David Sepulveda, who created *Powerful Knowledge*, he told me the artists had to submit their concept designs to the CNI for grant funding and once they were selected they had full artistic license to carry out their vision.

All three muralists closely considered the community in which they painted their murals. Robert “Problak” Gibbs grew up in Grove Hall and created his mural out of a sense of gratitude for the place he grew up in. The mural features a little African-American boy. Gibbs saw this project as a chance to inspire hope and reflect the people in the community. Perhaps the boy represents Gibbs, or other little boys in the neighborhood who have a dream to create. Just as Gibbs dreams started in Grove Hall, his mural is meant to empower others to know they can pursue their dreams and create the life they want to live.

Community involvement in the project is another way to assess the social impact on the community. Of the three artists Sepulveda was the only one who I was able to talk with personally to give more insight into the relationship of artist and community participation:

In this project I was open to the community to come and participate if they wished. A young man approached from the community who wanted to participate in the time he had available from his responsibilities and could assist me some days helping me to paint some parts of the mural. He told me that it was the first time having this kind of experience painting a large-scale mural which was very interesting.

Community involvement, even just one person, gave this young man a new experience he had never before. I also spoke with one of the librarians who works at the Grove Hall Public Library, the parking lot of which holds the mural of Mandela. She reflected on the mural painting process saying that everyday different members of the community would

come by and watch the painting, take pictures and speak with the artist. This librarian remembers the excitement in the community to see this colorful mural arise from a blank wall. These personal connections bring this mural to life. The painting process, by participating physically or watching the daily progress, gives each person who experiences it a personal story. Because murals have to be created on-site, the painting is art in itself. As Nato Thompson writes in *Living as Form*:

Art into life: Is there any more persistent utopia in the history of vanguard expression? Shedding its external forms, its inherited techniques, its specialized materials, art becomes a living gesture, rippling out across the sensible surface of humanity. It creates an ethos, a mythos, an intensely vibrant presence; it migrates from the pencil, the chisel or the brush into ways of doing and modes of being . . . it's about transforming your everyday existence (73).

Murals are a “living gesture” as they take form through layers coming to life in sections with the help of many hands. As they are exposed to the elements over time they begin to crumble and fade. They are a reflection of the time they were created, but are not meant to last forever.

Grove Hall has a long history of community unrest and socioeconomic disparity and it is projects like HUD's Choice Neighborhood project that are working to create a better sense of place and pride in the neighborhood. As Maura Greaney, a social worker who has extensively studied Boston murals, observes in her study “The Power of the Urban Canvas,” murals are more than a mere visual transformation of a wall or building:

But this transformation runs deeper than the artistry of the murals; the real works of art are the changes these collaborative projects inspire within communities. Mural projects mobilize communities to articulate dreams, express frustrations, and most importantly, consider strategies for change. Thus, they are a worthy consideration for public policymakers (8).

In cities across America, outdoor mural paintings have brought public art to the urban landscape. Paint and politics have been splashed upon city walls for decades, replacing blank exteriors with vibrant colors that tell a story.

Because the artists had a particular agenda in creating these murals they serve the community by both their presence as a beautiful piece of art but also as a call to action. As much of Boston art has been called “dull” and “too white”³¹ it is a testament to the intention of the CNI Grant to select art that reflects the diverse community of Grove Hall and Boston by featuring African-Americans in all three murals. Although some may still consider these murals too general in terms of theme they are a step in the right direction to creating more provocative public art in Boston.

³¹ <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/08/29/boston-best-public-art>

Conclusion

When reflecting on the last year of research, dialogue, and writing, it is a complex proposition to imagine a concise conclusion. These murals were brought to life through city funding. The Federal Government and Boston regards public art funding to be a pillar in urban redevelopment projects. From as early as the 1920s American artists used public art as a vehicle for social and political messaging. As Virginia Marquardt writes in her article for *Arts Journal* “Art on the Political Front in America”:

Two major formulations of the relationship between art and society appeared in politically affiliated or aligned magazines in America from the early twenties to the late thirties. These formulations were “revolutionary art” and “proletarian art.” Under these slogans, the issues of the social role of art and the formal characteristics and techniques appropriate for a politically activist art were raised (73).

In 1932 David Alfaro Siqueiros one the Los Tres Grandes (The Three Great Muralists) painted American Tropical a mural to bring awareness to the exploitation of Mexican workers in Los Angeles. It was painted over within a year.³² The public art that arose from the New Deal consisted of wholesome safe content portraying idyllic themes of American life.

With the Government stepping in and taking the reins on public art projects there is a shift of power dynamics from the people to the Federal Government. Thus there is a transition of motivation from the community coming together to create art for a purpose to the Government using it as a tool to revitalize the community. I believe the Government funding needs to be factored in discussing the success of the Grove Hall murals. Without the funding there would be no murals. And the artists and their work was

³² <http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/mural.html>

brought to life because of the NCI funding. So between not having murals and having these three murals depicting African-Americans is powerful and worthy of praise. However, it is a one-time project where little action or community involvement took place. Only one young man came to help paint *Powerful Knowledge*. There was great potential not utilized to create more opportunities to involve the community in bringing these murals to life.

To bring a mural from concept to actualization requires many relationships to form. Part of what makes murals so special is how many people have to come together. From the government funding to city officials, to developers, to the artist and the community, murals are a collaboration. Little victories in building community had to take place to provide these murals with a home. Although *Love Thyself* was rejected by multiple developers Victor “MARKA27” Quiñonez did not change or modify his concept but worked with the city until it found the right location. Originally the mural was to be called *Sacred Heart* but I believe there is something poetic in the title change as he loved his vision and did not compromise and the community has embraced the mural and loves seeing an African-American woman with her natural hair. As Alan Barnett says “The murals are in fact mirrors that show us what we are, what we could be, and how (Barnett, 17).”

Each artist took this opportunity to reflect on the neighborhood and create a mural that is intended to uplift the spirits of the community, and I believe that is their greatest success. Each mural was painted by a minority in our country, one of whom is an immigrant. They chose African-Americans at the center of their work. These murals

represent a sense of hope, an invitation to love, a call to higher knowledge, and inspiration to follow your dreams.

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